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A NEW PLAN FOR A CONTEST IN PUBLIC SPEAKING¹

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We are told that the days of oratory are past. Taking "oratory" in the sense in which it is generally used, they *are* past, and we are glad of it. But the days of "public speaking" have only just begun. Today there are a hundred fields open to the effective public speaker where opportunities for "oratory" are rare. In this busy world we have no time for the formal and ornate style that we designate as oratory. Of course there are certain occasions where the polish of a Cicero might still be welcome or even demanded, but our school system is training students for the hundred and one daily opportunities rather than for the special formal occasion. We are to train the everyday speaker, not the orator.

Certainly there is a large field open for the development in our school children of the power to *gather, select, arrange, and present material in order to effect a given audience in a given way, NOW*. The very outlining of an address will often mean a favorable verdict, and that verdict may be rendered by a jury, may be rendered at the polls, or in the corners of a classroom after the teacher has finished. Our boys and girls have innumerable topics on which they gladly speak if they are encouraged—"Fraternities in the High School," "Purity of Amateur Athletics," "Segregation," "Scholarship among Athletes." Again, they are easily interested in local politics and social problems, where the teacher is alive. Once we get rid of the conception that public speaking is something for displaying the talents of a certain gifted few and encourage even the apparently ungifted to express themselves clearly, directly, logically, and with simple manner, we have gone

¹ Stenographic report of an address given at the Twenty-fourth Educational Conference of the Academies and High Schools in Relations with the University of Chicago, April 20, 1912.

a long way to create an interest in public speaking as a practical as well as an "academic" subject. By academic I mean one that trains the powers of observation, comparison, and generalization.

I have no sympathy whatever with the high-school oratorical contests as ordinarily conducted. They are generally contests between the faculty of one school versus the faculty of another. No high school would dare take a boy and say: "You are to represent us in the next contest. Don't ask any help, don't crib, go to work and study it out." No, since it is a test of the coaches rather than a test of the work of the school, we develop a style of rhetoric and delivery meant to win, and generally therefore false in every detail.

You understand, of course, that I have no quarrel with the specialist who is engaged to give instruction in oratory in secondary schools. His work is very valuable in training the students in the use of the voice and the body, in diction and enunciation, and frequently his ideal of public speaking is not at all different from that which I am setting forth to you today. I recognize the fact, however, that the specialists in our secondary schools are in a great minority, and I am therefore pleading for an ideal that can be realized through the faculties already in existence. There is no reason why a live teacher of history, or of political economy, or of rhetoric, or even of science, possessing a knowledge of some of the fundamentals of effective public speaking, should not be a most important factor in creating interest in public speaking that should spread through the entire school. The way matters now stand, many teachers are overawed by the conception that oratory is outside of their realm through failure on their part to get the professional training in that subject. And again, the oratorical contest overawes them. When I suggest that the gathering, selecting, and arranging of material, together with its clear and forceful and simple presentation is the goal of teaching in oral composition, it becomes evident at once that wherever we cannot get the right kind of specialist there is likely to be found the opportunity for some sane member of the faculty to undertake the work.

It is just beginning to dawn even upon the college faculties that training in public speaking is an academic work, that it

combines training in rhetoric with training in logic, psychology (as applied to audiences), and forensics, and this entirely apart from the practical value of such training for the student who has to go out and mix with the world.

To encourage the work in oral composition, the University proposes an annual contest based largely on the method developed at Lake Forest University, to whom we owe a large debt of gratitude for the suggestion. The great value of this contest lies in the fact that while it does not debar the student with a particular oratorical gift, it does not discourage the thousands of other students who make up the great majority of high-school students. All of these, or nearly all, can be trained to think clearly and present simply and effectively. The chief result to be attained is to stimulate clear thinking and simple, clear expression among all students in secondary schools. We want a contest that shall represent the work of each school in oral composition, a contest to which it shall be practically impossible to send "coached" students, who represent not the work in public speaking of their home institution, but a particular teacher or teachers who have trained a promising candidate by virtually writing his oration for him—a course followed in part or in whole by nearly every high school sending representatives to public contests. This is not to impute dishonesty to the schools—far from it; it merely indicates the prevailing notion that since an opposing institution deems it right to proceed in that way another school must pursue similar methods in order to stand an equal chance.

There are certain minor weaknesses in the Lake Forest scheme which I trust we can avoid, and for that reason I am suggesting that a committee be appointed to investigate the whole matter and to report a plan which shall be put into practice next year.

Roughly speaking, then, the plan is as follows: Two or more representatives from each high school meet at the University and to them are assigned subjects as far as possible within their experience. After an hour or so the representatives are called upon to speak for four or five minutes and are judged primarily on their clearness of thinking and simple effectiveness of presentation. A given number are chosen from this preliminary con-

test who take part in the final contest the same night, the subjects on that occasion being different from those discussed at the preliminaries.

I am not attempting to describe in any detail the method pursued at Lake Forest, nor even that which we hope to follow here. If you want to know just what is going on at Lake Forest you have only to send a post card to receive full information. I am not even going into full detail of what we expect to do here. My one purpose is to bring the matter before you and to urge the appointment of a committee which we hope will be able to present a plan in the early fall that will meet with your hearty approval.¹

¹ The Conference voted to appoint the following committee to act upon the suggestions made in this address: Professor S. H. Clark, the University of Chicago, chairman; Mr. P. W. G. Keller, High School, Appleton, Wisconsin; Mr. B. G. Nelson, the University of Chicago.